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# Understanding "A Common Word between Us and You" through I.A. Richards' New Rhetoric

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I.A. Richards defines rhetoric as the study of misunderstandings and their remedies. I argue in this paper that "A Common Word Between Us and You" (ACW) - a rhetorical letter coauthored by H.R.H Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad and 38 Muslim scholars - shares Richards' definition as its end and anchors his theory in practice. ACW is an attempt to avoid misunderstandings and to allow for understandings between Christians and Muslims about two of their common Scriptural commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. In Richards' call for a new rhetoric, he asserts that the core of rhetoric must be about how to use language and that words and their meaning must be studied to develop a strategy that seeks exposition over persuasion if remedies for a misunderstanding is the goal. My explication of ACW will reveal that the authors' invention and arrangement of arguments not only adhere to Richards' assertions but also employ some of the tools Richards utilized to achieve expository rhetoric.

According to Plato, whether a thing is true or not must be exposed and concluded through dialectic before the act of speaking or writing persuasively is employed as an art. Richards identifies with the latter caveat to engaging in rhetoric. However, he departs from Plato's understanding of the relationship between the purpose of rhetoric and that of dialectic by concluding that it is possible for rhetoric and dialectic to contribute to a mutual purpose. Richards averred that rhetoric should be a connected extension of dialectic's study of misunderstandings, and that it is necessary to consider those misunderstandings which are inherent to language before other misunderstandings can be navigated with any degree of accurate expression (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 5).

In *Phaedrus*, Plato writes:

> Socrates: And when does rhetoric have greater power ?
> Phaedrus: Clearly, when we wander in different directions [i.e. when there is misunderstanding].
> Socrates: It follows that whoever wants to acquire the art of rhetoric must first make a systematic division and grasp the particular character of each of these two kinds of thing, both the kind where most people wander in different directions and the kind where they do not (65).

The purpose of rhetoric for Richards is also a moral one. Richards proposed that all language and communication is inevitably value-laden, that the ethics of language, as opposed to ethics in language, exhibit a range in type and degree. Language is utilized rhetorically to affect, for better and worse, our behavior, choices, and judgments about others. Richards believes that written words are dangerous things: misread orders on the field of battle or isolated statements of Scripture have led to many deaths (*How to Read a Page*, 74). I will show that the religious language of ACW shares Richards' fervor on this matter.

The primary method used by the authors to elucidate the meanings of Scriptural passages in ACW is the inclusion of paragraphs intended to address the ambiguity of specific words within a particular passage. The first verses of the letter referenced from the Qur'an are followed by four paragraphs similar in function to the following:

> The words: He Alone, remind Muslims that their hearts must be devoted to God Alone, since God says in the Holy Qur'an: God hath not assigned unto any man two hearts within his body (Al-Ahzab, 33:4). God is Absolute and therefore devotion to Him must be totally sincere" (2).

The purpose of the paragraph is to profess what the reader should understand about how most Muslims understand the words. To do this, the authors employ two literary terms, abstraction and metaphor, which are also discussed at length by Richards. The words He Alone

are abstracted from their original context (the Qur'an) into the context(s) of the letter. The authors limit the meanings and thoughts brought into the text by the reader by defining the context and demonstrating that the words represent a symbol that refers to Muslims' hearts, not symbols assumed by Christian readers. The symbol has a direct relationship to the reference, or meaning, created by the author: it is a reminder that their hearts must be devoted only to God. Richards exposes the relationships between the variables within individual sentences to make brittle the foundational premise of traditional argumentation. Known as constancy of word meaning, this premise assumes that because words work in one way they cannot also work in other ways and have simultaneously another meaning. Therefore, traditional argumentation considers the sentence to represent the smallest variable unit of an argument. Richards' theory of abstraction deconstructs the sentence, and is known as the semantic triangle. It has two symbols (bases of triangle) called the tenor and the vehicle. Through the process of reading or interpreting a metaphor, the tenor is likened to the vehicle through which a description or referent is ascribed to the tenor thereby changing its attributes. Their interaction produces a synthesis, off of which another antithesis - and thus another triangle – may be framed for greater understanding and knowledge between two actors.

The phrase, 'A Common Word between Us and You', is not merely the title of the essay but also serves as a metaphor with an unstated, or enthymematic, premise. It contains three variables (Word, Us, You), which invoke multiple yet simultaneous meanings throughout the letter. 'Common' is a qualifier of whichever meaning(s) a reader selects for 'Word' at the top point of the triangle. The tenor is Christianity (or Christians) and the vehicle is Islam (or Muslims), meaning that Islam is used to shape the perception of whether Christianity's 'Word' is common to Islam's. Occasionally, however, the authors allow Christianity to move, as though a vehicle, certain attributes of Islam onto itself to broaden the scope of understanding while narrowing that of misunderstanding. The textual archetype for the latter phenomenon comes from the section titled, "Love of God as the First and Greatest Commandment in the Bible," where the authors cite several Biblical passages that discuss the greatest commandment before quoting the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH):

> "...we can now perhaps understand the words *'The best that I have said—myself, and the prophets that came before me'* as equating the blessed formula *'There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things'* precisely with the 'First and Greatest Commandment' to love God, with all one's heart and soul, as found in various places in the Bible" (10).

In the letter, 'Word' is deliberately treated by contextual language as capable of simultaneously representing a common God, common Scriptural commandments, a common purpose of Scripture, or a shared understanding or knowledge of themes, such as definitions of love, peace, and justice, between Muslims and Christians. All can be found within the text and none are persuaded or professed with greater emphasis or subordination than another, as is typically found with exposition. The absent premise, then, is rather a limited collection of optional premises that serve to accommodate the diverse appetites of their factionary Christian audience without compromising Muslim beliefs. The vast support for ACW comes from Christian leaders as diverse as Yale Divinity School and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Their formal responses are distinct, but all indicate preferences within the stated collection of simultaneous meanings for the absent premise. Therefore, an expositional rhetorical strategy is what allowed Christians to be persuaded that their Word was common to Muslims'.

Some have attributed to 'Word' the meaning of a mutual source of Scriptural themes. If, however, the authors chose to advocate entirely for a common God, which is a more volatile subject, then their audience's initial appetite for commonality pauses to consider the unpredictable implications of consent. Greater understandings, and corrected misunderstandings between Muslims and Christians, are achieved because ACW contains much rhetorical space wherein readers may construct their own hierarchy of meaning – their own emphasis and subordination – for the unstated premise. Some readers may agree with the conclusion that Muslims and Christians share a common 'Word' if it means the two greatest commandments of the Qur'an, Torah and New Testament, but disagree if it means a common definition of love. By allowing the reader to create their own meaning of 'Word', the authors of ACW persuade them of what is common to Muslims and Christians. Thus, it is a letter that utilizes exposition to achieve a persuasive remedy to the misunderstanding that Christians and Muslims do not share a common Word.

It is evident that the process of selecting information has criteria in ACW. First, all information must relate to the primary themes addressed in the text, which are the two common and greatest commandments of love of God and love of neighbor. The second is more implicit: the information used should be Scriptural. The Scriptural emphasis is deliberate because the textual foundations of both religions hold the greatest credibility and authority on such matters as the 'Word'. Ethos, then, is a necessary available means of exposing their common Word. The majority of scriptural passages are connected to a third criterion, which is that the selected information should demonstrate that the idea of a common word has mutual precedence.

There are three main sections of the letter and two have subsections. The summary and abridgement is actually part of the final section, which is more of an invitational rather than combative calling to live and serve God and neighbor together on the basis of what Christians and Muslims have in common. The first section has one part about how certain passages show Muslims what it means to love God and another about how this is similarly true for Christians. The second section serves the same purpose, but regarding their love of neighbor.

The invention or selection of information in ACW has two actors: Christians and Muslims. In his theory of abstraction and metaphor, Richards also operated with two grammatical actors: the symbol and thing, the vehicle and tenor. Plato, in dialectic, considered the exchange between two actors, too. The intended strategy of arrangement is comparative, which, according to Richards, is how we prefer to interpret and comprehend information. And the style is metaphorical: a concept natural to our ability to present and describe information. Therefore, the invention, arrangement and style of ACW actively guards against Richards' proper meaning superstition and usage doctrine, and further qualifies it as a practical exhibition of Richards' new rhetoric.

The proper meaning superstition describes a characteristic of language that Richards held was encouraged by classical rhetoric and a chief cause of misunderstanding. It is the rhetorical fallacy "that a word has a meaning of its own independent of and controlling its use and the purpose for which it should be uttered" (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 11). If this were true, if a word did have its own meaning, then communication would certainly be less arbitrary and verbose. However, problems arise when an independent meaning of a word is assumed universally. There are words that appear to have an independent meaning of their own. But this illusion is due to the constancy of how they are used and the immutable context in which they are applied, each of which may fluctuate, and not the words themselves. Thus, after most every

passage from the Qur'an appears one or more paragraphs from the letter explaining the words and their meaning.  The third section of the letter contains the scriptural roots of the thesis:

> "Say: O [Jews, Christians, and Muslims]! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God…(Aal 'Imran 3:64)" (11)

ACW's authors explicitly demonstrate their concern for words and their meanings throughout the letter, but none more than the paragraph following those roots.  It begins, "Clearly, the blessed words…relate to the Unity of God."  The word 'relate' is important to the connection from ACW to Richards.  He often used this word to describe our understandings and misunderstanding as produced by conventional relationships between words.  With abstraction, the symbol 'we shall ascribe no partner unto Him' has a causal relationship to the referent, or thing, 'Unity of God'.  How ACW safeguards against the proper meaning superstition is by not presenting an exclusive referent and by using the indirect term, 'relate'.  The sentence does not read: 'Clearly the blessed words…mean only the Unity of God,' which would preclude the concept of Christian Trinity.

One example where the proper meaning superstition is guarded against is in the 'Love of God in Islam' section.  The authors write a sentence that, if left unexplained, would not only leave much room for readers to cast things they already know onto the meaning of its subject but also to assume that the word soul has an independent meaning of its own: "For indeed, all that is in people's souls is known, and accountable, to God" (6).  What is in a soul and how is its composition known to Muslims?  In the section 'Love of God in the Bible', the authors use Mark 12:28-31 to depict the Christian understanding of the soul, mind, and heart as separate properties of human experience that must each be used to fully love God.  If this understanding were metaphorically cast onto the Muslim notion of the soul, other passages and references to the Qur'an may be viewed as contradictory, which may jeopardize the validity of a common Word.

ACW is itself a vast metaphor comprised of smaller metaphors – or, rather, a vast triangle made up of smaller triangles.  The contexts also are hierarchical: Islam to Christianity, Western world to Arab world, Christians to Muslims, Bible to Qur'an, Jesus to Muhammad, authors to readers, authors to text, readers to text, readers to readers.  In the third and fourth paragraphs of ACW's summary is an example of how the concepts of abstraction and metaphor can relate and be incorporated into a writing style that minimizes the problems of the proper meaning superstition.  There are three semantic triangles in the third paragraph.  First, "Of God's Unity" is a thought created by the authors from the word/symbol "God" to mean, "the One!...the Self-Sufficient"(1).  Second, "necessity of love for God" is a thought from the words, "…devote thyself to Him" to mean, "with a complete devotion"(2).  The third part is identical in sentence structure, but about love for the neighbor.  In this paragraph, the authors' effort to limit the usage doctrine with subjects on Islam is evident with commentary that is absent from the fourth paragraph, which is solely a biblical passage.

The Islamic understanding of God's unity, love of God, and love of neighbor in the third paragraph also represents the vehicle of a metaphor.  The tenor is the Christian understanding of God's unity, love of God and love of neighbor in the fourth paragraph.  The vehicle is the means by which meaning is added to the tenor.  Essentially, arranging the Christian understanding besides the Muslim understanding encourages the reader to infer that there is a common word, which is the meaning or top of the triangle and is mentioned in the second paragraph and begins the fifth paragraph.  Therefore, the thought process and writing style of ACW exhibits Richards'

new rhetoric. The letter has two actors in Jesus and Muhammad, whose words are placed in dialectical opposition. In those two paragraphs, a series of semantic triangles together form the base tenor while Mark 12:29-31 is the vehicle of the overarching metaphor of ACW.

Richards held essentially two criteria for the purpose of rhetorical text. It must be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies and it must first expose the extent to which the relationships of the words and their meanings have caused the misunderstanding. ACW achieves both. It studies the misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims: that their religions do not share principles by which they commonly love God and neighbor. Also, there is little diversion within the text from examining the words and their Scriptural meanings to determine the points on which they differ and agree.

The question remains: how is success measured for a text? If a text is like a theory, then it must adequately account for all the facts and work in practice to be successful. Because ACW is a text of exposition, its goal was to expose as many Christians and Muslims as possible to the nature of a particular concept shared between them. The success does not lay in how many people read the document or in how many initiatives or movements toward peace and justice the letter inspired. Many people could read the document and not perceive the common Word because either it does not serve their agenda or because they are not suitable readers. Many initiatives could sprout and claim ACW as their tipping point, but enact its mission with a misguided understanding of the commonality. The success rests in how aptly the common Word was revealed to prevent further misunderstandings, which depends on whether the challenges to that process were overcome sufficiently.

The primary challenge facing ACW's success as a rhetorical text of exposition was the balancing act between deliberate and non-deliberate metaphor. A deliberate metaphor is a conscious language choice of the authors that compares two things, or ideas, to create a meaning. A non-deliberate metaphor is an explicit language opportunity within the text for the reader to rationalize preconceived tenors and vehicles into a textual tenor or vehicle, thereby corrupting its meaning. Richards did not specifically allude to these ideas, but he did mention that a broad division could be made between two meanings of metaphors. There are those metaphors which work between some direct resemblance between two things and those which work through a shared attitude we may attribute towards them both (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 118). Because the invention, arrangement and style of the information have a metaphorical undertone, and because both types of metaphor are present in the letter, the degree of quality to which they were treated is determinative of ACW's success.

The word deliberate is not here synonymous with intentional nor is non-deliberate synonymous with unintentional. Any conclusion about authors' intentions, without talking to them personally, is mere speculation and largely irrelevant to the actual meaning their words take on. All of the previous textual explications show the language working through a present tenor and a present vehicle to illustrate an explicit reference. Whether or not this was intentional is of little concern.

All deliberate metaphors can have non-deliberate meanings, but non-deliberate metaphors cannot have deliberate meanings. Because there is no deliberate meaning to the Christian vehicle, the non-deliberate meanings are unlimited by the author and relative those which the reader chooses to impose. Some such meanings may make the triangle valid and others may not. If love means to love God and neighbor like Christ did, then the argument would be valid because Muslims also strive to love like Christ did. But if Christian love of God and neighbor presupposes faith in the divinity of Christ and the Trinity, then the argument would be invalid.

Though Muslims do not share this doctrine in belief, the Qur'an shows that God through Muhammad called them to love Isa:

> 'Behold, the angels said, 'O Mary, God announces good news to you by a Word from God named the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, honored in this world and the hereafter and among the Intimates (Cleary, 22).

ACW is a rhetorical text that achieves a persuasive remedy of a misunderstanding through exposition. It aptly reveals the common Scriptural Word shared by Christians and Muslims to prevent further misunderstanding and it sufficiently handles the challenge of the proper meaning superstition and the balancing act between deliberate and non-deliberate metaphor. The non-deliberate yet simultaneous meanings available for the readers to select as the Christian vehicle do not upset the validity of the metaphor because none are emphasized or subordinated more than another. The goal of ACW is not to expose what the Word is and means, but that any of those non-deliberate meanings ascribed to 'Word' by the audience are common between Christians and Muslims. Because ACW meets Richards' criteria of a rhetorical text and employs some of the tools Richards utilized to achieve expository rhetoric that prevents future misunderstanding, it therefore demonstrates Richards' new rhetoric in practice.

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